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Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) – role, function and responsibilities

1 Background¹

AFBI was created on 1st April 2006 as an amalgamation of the DARD Science Service and the Agricultural Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ARINI). AFBI is a DARD Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) established under the Agriculture (Northern Ireland) Order, 2004.² AFBI carries out high technology research and development, statutory, analytical, and diagnostic testing functions for DARD and other Government departments, public bodies and commercial companies. AFBI is managed by an independent Board which is also responsible for monitoring its performance.

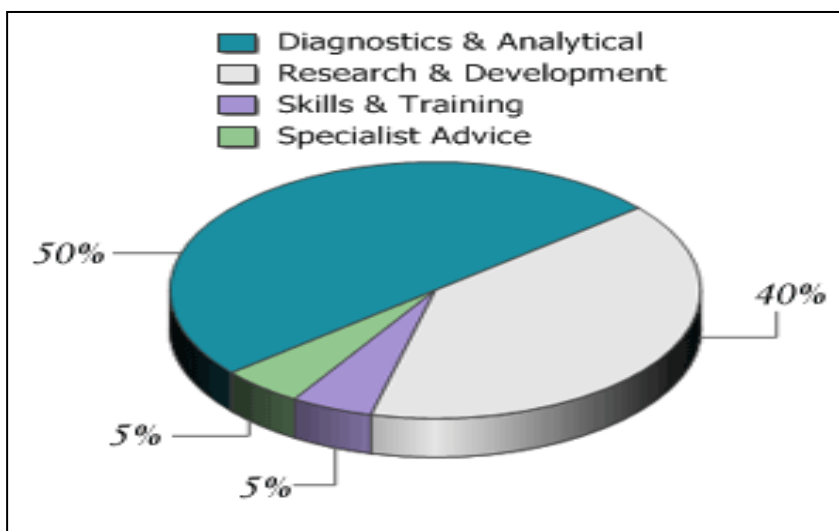
¹ [AFBI: About us](#)

² [Agriculture \(Northern Ireland\) Order](#)

AFBI's main customers are:³

- The Department of Agriculture & Rural Development for Northern Ireland, which is the largest single customer and accounts for approximately 80% of AFBI's revenue
- Other public bodies including the Department of the Environment; the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure; the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; the Food Standards Agency; and the European Union
- The agri-food industry including both primary producers and agri-food companies.

Figure 1: AFBI's main work areas⁴



AFBI's headquarters is located in New Forge Lane, Belfast. There are six other bases across Northern Ireland: Stormont, Hillsborough, Crossnacreevy, Loughgall, Omagh and Bushmills.⁵

2. Responsibilities

- AFBI is a multidisciplinary science Institute engaged in science in agriculture, food, fisheries, horticulture and the environment.

³ [AFBI: What we do](#)

⁴ [AFBI: What we do](#)

⁵ [AFBI: Location](#)

- The Agriculture, Food & Environmental Sciences Division within AFBI provides scientific support for the growth, sustainability and competitiveness of Northern Ireland's farming, fishing and agri-food industries, and assists the industry to maintain high standards of environmental protection and animal welfare. By way of example the Novel Processes and Products sub programme is currently researching the use of high pressure technology in the preservation of food; this method could be used on fruit and vegetables, cooked meat products, dairy products and seafood.⁶
- AFBI's Applied Plant Science and Biometrics Division (APSD) provides statutory services including certification of monitoring for DARD, pasture, seeds and plant health, and provides specialist advice on weeds, crop plants, varieties and disease problems. APSD's research takes account of environmental needs and sustainable economic growth in Northern Ireland's countryside. This division contains the Biomaterials and Microscopy Section which covers a wide range of disciplines, focusing mainly on analysing plant and bio materials.⁷
- AFBI's Veterinary Sciences Division (VSD) works on animal disease and food safety. VSD delivers veterinary science to the animal, food and fish based sectors of the agri-food industry. The VSD carries out diagnostic work on animal diseases such as Foot-and-Mouth disease, Bovine TB and avian influenza.⁸
- The Fisheries and Aquatic Ecosystems Branch carries out research and development, monitoring and technology transfer in support of the sustainable management of fisheries and aquatic resources in Northern Ireland. This branch supplies research and advice to all Agencies with Local, National and European Union (EU) level responsibility for fisheries and environmental issues.⁹
- The Renewable Energy Centre of Excellence, currently under development at AFBI Hillsborough, coordinates research being conducted across AFBI in areas relevant to Renewable Energy. The centre will assist the agri-food industry to maximise the potential of renewable energy and support technology transfer activities. AFBI installed an on-farm anaerobic digester on their Hillsborough site during 2008 in order to gather information on anaerobic digestion. This is a process which uses organic matter to produce biogas (renewable energy) and digestate (biofertiliser).¹⁰

⁶ [AFBI: Project: The use of high hydrostatic pressure for the preservation of foods](#)

⁷ [AFBI Biomaterials Characterisation](#)

⁸ [AFBI Stormont](#)

⁹ [AFBI: Policies for Sustainable Freshwater Fisheries Management](#)

¹⁰ [AFBI Anaerobic Digestion](#)

3. Structure and management

AFBI is managed by a board whose responsibilities are:¹¹

- To ensure that AFBI meets its agreed objectives and targets set down in the Management Statement and Financial Memorandum;
- To provide strategic leadership in the formulation of AFBI's strategy for the discharge of its responsibilities, taking account of the Minister's and DARD's priorities, as outlined in the science and technology strategies and in Service Level Agreements (SLAs) set by DARD and other AFBI customers;
- to ensure that effective arrangements are in place to provide assurance to DARD and the Minister on risk management, governance and internal control;
- to communicate AFBI's strategy and services to stakeholders in Northern Ireland and beyond;
- to understand and articulate science and research and development needs and advise the Chief Executive on drawing these requirements into the formulation of a strategic plan for AFBI;
- to oversee AFBI's functions, including encouragement of the highest standards in the disbursement of finance, and the efficient and effective use of staff and other resources throughout AFBI;
- to represent AFBI to its key audiences, for example industry, academic institutions and other research providers, locally, nationally and internationally.
- to engage with the Minister and DARD on matters pertaining to the work of AFBI and its strategic direction and input to the overall DARD strategic objectives.
- to identify and assess current and future developments in the agri-food and rural economy sector, and to recommend opportunities to expand into new markets and innovations to meet customers' needs.

Members are appointed in accordance with the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA) NI Code of Practice. The terms of appointment of members are for either two or three year periods, with the Chair appointed for four years.¹²

The senior management team consists of the Chief Executive Officer, three Deputy Chief Executive Officers (Agri-Food and Environmental Science Division, Veterinary Sciences Division and Applied Plant Science and Biometrics Division) and Head of Corporate Services Division.¹³

¹¹ [AFBI Board](#)

¹² [AFBI Board members](#)

¹³ [AFBI Senior Management Team](#)

4. Resources

AFBI employs over 800 staff across its various sites.¹⁴ According to the latest available AFBI Annual Report and Statement of Accounts (2009/2010) AFBI had a net operating cost of £43.38 million. Within this net position AFBI raised £10.78 million.¹⁵ Income from Resource Grant-in-Aid during the last five years is as follows:¹⁶

- 2006/07: £41.03m
- 2007/08: £40.92m
- 2008/09: £42.95m
- 2009/10: £39.1m
- 2010/11: £37.4m

AFBI's main point of contact with DARD is the Sponsor Branch in the department. Regular meetings are held with the Sponsor Branch where matters relating to corporate governance, performance measurement, budgets, financing and accountability matters are discussed.¹⁷

5. Key challenges facing AFBI

- In the 2009/10 Annual Report Chief Executive Officer, Dr Seamus Kennedy, acknowledged the challenges for AFBI in relation to the pressures on public sector finances.¹⁸
- In light of this challenge AFBI plans to grow and diversify their revenue base by extending the reach of AFBI internationally and improving operational efficiency and effectiveness.¹⁹ This will make the organisation less dependent on its DARD funding, which has been decreasing in recent years.
- Savings measures forecasted in the DARD budget include incremental recovering of VAT by AFBI.²⁰

¹⁴ [AFBI Promotional Video](#)

¹⁵ [Annual Report and Statement of Accounts 2009 - 10](#) p. 25

¹⁶ [AFBI Business Plan 2010-11](#) p9

¹⁷ [Annual Report and Statement of Accounts 2009 - 10](#) p. 11

¹⁸ [Annual Report and Statement of Accounts 2009 - 10](#) p8

¹⁹ [AFBI Business Plan 2010 - 11](#) p6

²⁰ [DARD Draft Budget 2011 - 15](#) p36

- There is an ongoing review of AFBI procurement, prioritized by potential for savings included in the draft budget.²¹
- It is outlined in the DARD Draft Budget that AFBI will continue to seek further commercial income.²²

²¹ [DARD Draft Budget 2011 - 15](#) p43

²² [DARD Draft Budget 2011 - 15](#) p28